



Rooted in Samurai: Kazuo Ishiguro's Religious Interrogations

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Abstract

Taking religion as a powerful influence in the construction of individual identity and contextualising Kazuo Ishiguro's complex views on religion, particularly his statement expressing caution about "labelling himself an atheist", this paper looks into the novelist's distinctive approach to religious identity, which defies the confines of established norms and doctrine. It argues a case of constructing Ishiguro's religious identity in his connection with samurai ethos that makes him different from the people who follow Christianity, Buddhism, Shintoism, or any other established religion in the world. Samurai principles represent a class consciousness where there is a sense of martial virtues, loyalty, and complete self-discipline. Originating and practised in medieval Japan the samurai way of life was very influential in Japanese culture, devoid of any sort of religious impression with it during that time. Over time, the samurai way of life directly came under the influence of Buddhism, Shintoism, and mostly Christianity. Thus, it has flourished and continued with a religious connotation even in modern Japan. In Japanese culture, the modern variation of the samurai has come to be known as bushido. Born to a Japanese family and raised in Britain's cultural milieu, Ishiguro appears to find his religious roots in the traditional samurai heritage. For Ishiguro, this is indeed an alternative approach of identifying himself as an atheist. In doing so, Ishiguro negotiates between his cultural backgrounds, characterised by Christian principles and the cultural ethos of bushido predominant in England and Japan, respectively. Therefore, this paper argues the case of compromise that Ishiguro seems to discover between his Japanese and European cultural backgrounds, specifically concerning the issue of his religious identity. In this context, Ishiguro's negotiation of identity is portrayed as more than merely adopting a middle ground; rather it involves the case of finding an alternative path for identity construction.

Keywords

samurai, bushido, Christianity, Kazuo Ishiguro, compromise

Kazuo Ishiguro is a Japanese-born British novelist. He was born on 8th November 1954 to Shizuo and Shizuko Ishiguro in a Japanese family in Nagasaki. He spent five years of his childhood living in a house built in a traditional Japanese style and decorated with tatami mats, sliding shoji screens, samurai swords, banners, and heirlooms. His father, Shizuo Ishiguro, was born in Shanghai in 1920, and his mother, Shizuko Ishiguro, was from the city of Nagasaki. Ishiguro was just five years old when his family left Japan in April 1960 to stay in Britain. His father was invited by the British government to work for the National Institute for Oceanography. Therefore, Ishiguro had an English education rather than a Japanese one during his early years in England. This means that he was brought up in a society which was multi-ethnic society, yet predominately Christian society. This exposure likely led him to encounter Christian faith and principles in Britain. Interestingly, he most likely had an atheist upbringing like many Japanese people. Ishiguro himself confessed that he was “wary of labelling himself an atheist” (Delistraty). Yet, in his novels *Never Let Me Go* (2005) and *The Buried Giant* (2015), for example, there are many references to the essential elements of religion such as soul, morality, Church, fates, and beliefs. Although every religion must carry certain distinct principles and rituals, they share a common message—a message centred on the notions of humanity and salvation, often achieved through sacrifice. Modern academic studies on religion deal with the question of what makes a person religious. In religious discourses, scholars have often argued that religious identity is something which is embedded in ritual performance and celebration. At the same time, this type of discourse creates a problem to challenge the new method of identity formation beyond the territorial political communities. Therefore, the question of the religious identity of Ishiguro gets complicated. Therefore, this essay attempts to examine the context of samurai heritage, differentiating it from the discourses available in the study of world religions.

The question of religious identity arises when a person or group encounters ‘difference’ by coming into contact with other religious persons or groups. The ‘difference’ can be experienced in the religious diversities, ritual practices, ethos, and ideas in different religions that shape individual notions of personhood and experience. The passionate commitment of people towards their respective religions with certain differences from the other’s religions makes them different from each other. At other times, by contrast, shared ritual participation and celebration blur boundaries among religious groups and bring them together. This religious togetherness among people beyond boundaries promotes individual freedom and choice in finding out the self-conscious religious identity. In the essay “Religion and Identity: Ritual, Pilgrimage, and Frontiers Encounter” Pnina Werbner says that “historically, self-conscious religious identities are often produced when settled religions are challenged by encounters with other groups beyond their boundaries” (215). It may be noted that a “settled religion” typically refers to a well-established,

organised, and often institutionalised religious tradition with a long history and a set of beliefs, practices, and rituals. However, in these encounters, religious identity comes to be politicized, and evolves into a discourse about boundaries, relatedness, and otherness. People construct their religious identities by holding some preconceived ideas of their respective religions and also being part of the discourse of the religion. So, in the case of identity formation, a person can enjoy a sense of liberty, even by positioning his religion as a challenge to encounter the established notion of settled religion. Therefore, this kind of encounter opens up a discourse on the religious identity of individuals in which the identity can be a matter of choice or compromise. In this context, Kazuo Ishiguro, a Japanese-born British writer, seeks to establish his religious identity in the traditional samurai principles. In his quest of exploring his identity, Ishiguro appears to make a retreat from the settled religions such as Christianity, Buddhism, and Shintoism. By contrast, his passionate commitment and loyalty to samurai ancestry become essential to his lifestyle and authorship.

Willi Braun and Russell Mc Cutcheon's edited volume *Guide to the Study of Religion* presents a detailed study of religion and religious identities. Willi Braun, in his essay "Religion" published in this book, posits that religion is a word that is practically impossible to define in any absolute sense because it has no inherent content (3-18). Nevertheless, people have proposed various definitions of religion; the most popular definitions of religion are given in terms of function and content. In "Definition" William A. Arnal defines religion by associating it with people's most fundamental needs (21-34), whereas Melford E. Spiro in his essay "Religion: Problems of Definition and Explanation" talks about religion in terms of the content of religion: the belief in supernatural entities (85-126). In "Buddhism and the Definition of Religion" Martin Southwold tries to define religion by focusing on the elements of religion such as ritual, belief, and faith. Yet, there is another argument that all religions are united in their intellectual reflections, and therefore religion is essentially an intellectual activity. In this respect, "belief is held, at least implicitly, to be superior to ritual. Values and morality are more important than prayer and devotions" (Stringer 2). Therefore, it can be argued that religions are distinct from each other on the basis of their functions, contents, and elements. These religious distinctions are comparatively studied within a discipline known as Religious Studies. Daniel Dubuisson, in his book, *The Western Construction of Religion*, claims that the study of religion has become a discipline in its own right remarkably in the twentieth century.

Primarily, the definitions of religion revolve around ideas of unity, transcendence and transformation. Emile Durkheim's seminal work *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* deeply engages with the question of religion. In this book, Durkheim defines religion as "a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and prohibited—beliefs and practices

which unite into one moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them” (44). In the study of religion and religious identity, Durkheim analyses religion as a social phenomenon. He delves into the kind of religious identities that open up the possibility of religious cosmopolitanism, a vision of a transcendent globalising world. In such a world, religious identities are constructed beyond boundaries, by creating the grounds for more universal and inclusive identities. Therefore, religious identities are not merely reflections of material, territorial or political interests. He argues that people are connected in society and share a collective consciousness and solidarity merely through ritual participation. In this context, religious emblems or totemic objects are important elements in shaping the identities of those participating in these rituals. For that matter, the theoretical foundations of religious identity lie in the study of totemism—the belief that a person or a group has a mystical relationship to a totem—outlined in the early works of Durkheim, and Claude Lévi Strauss. In Durkheim and Lévi Strauss’s analysis, religious identities are formed by transcending religious boundaries, and ritual participation. Durkheim’s study of totemic societies in Australia, for example, is a foundational insight in the process of identity formation. In the book mentioned above, Durkheim describes the practices of the Australian Aboriginal Corroboree, the meeting of the clan at sacred sites for ritual celebration. At this meeting, the participants display sacred totemic emblems and express intense emotion through different activities like dancing, running, and jumping. Totemic emblems—the elements of the religious identity of the clan—are not merely a representation of the physical world. They are, in contrast, imbued with the passions and emotions of the clan that reflect the personhood and identity of the ritual participants themselves. Durkheim argues that the totemic principle is nothing else than the clan itself, personified and represented to the imagination under the visible form of the animal or vegetable which serves as a totem. In Durkheim’s analysis, religious identities of people are constructed through ritual participation and also displaying the totemic emblems which play a significant role in shaping the collective identity of the people involved. However, in “Religion as Cultural System” Clifford Geertz defines religion as “(1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic” (4). Indeed, both Durkheim and Geertz concur that religion is a system which is a coherent and unitary entity; something that unites people in this system is the root of religious identity.

Writers such as Rudolph Otto, Evans-Pritchard, and Robert Lowie have presented religion as a transcendental experience. In *The Idea of the Holy* Otto explores the mysterious elements of religion and interprets them as the defining feature of religion. Similarly, Evans-Pritchard took ‘awe’ and ‘wonder’ as the root of religion. He explores that people’s belief in the supernatural, weird, and divine

elements is an essential part of religion. Like these two scholars, Lowie also presents a similar kind of interpretation to find the origins of the religious identity of the people concerned. Overall, based on the various definitions of religion drawn from different traditions, these scholars converge on the concept of the transcendent and talk about the mysterious being that exists beyond the ordinary human experience.

Apart from the perception of unity and transcendence, another aspect of religion is transformation. Transformation in religion refers to the idea that religion can initiate a change in the individual and society. Arnold Van Gennep and Victor Turner are two important writers in religious studies who talk about a moral change in the individual and society. Gennep in his book *The Rites of Passage* discusses transformation as an essential element of religion. He suggests that rituals are the rites of passage in religious context that bring a moral change for individuals as well as society. On the other hand, Turner focuses on the healing power of religions that brings moral change. This change is one of the religious functions that unite all world religions. From the above discussion, it can be argued that the major world religions such as Christianity, Buddhism, and Islam are rooted in the idea of transformation. In this case, these writers' shared focus on transformation becomes central to all discourses on religion.

The features of religion as discussed above—unity, transcendence, and transformation—can be seen in religious discourses such as Christianity, Buddhism, and Shintoism. Each religious discourse is influential to the people of the respective religion. Drawing on Foucauldian notions of discourse as power/knowledge it can also be argued that religious identity is always the specific product of particular discursive formations at particular moments in history. If religion is defined as established in the above discussion, then it holds preconceived ideas embedded in religions (Stringer 15). As a matter of fact, it becomes difficult to identify what religious, if there are no preconceived ideas of religion. One solution to this problem would be to investigate what people within a given cultural or religious context consider to be religious in some ways. Therefore, it is important to interrogate a part of the world where religious discourses have not been influenced in some way by the “settled religions”, and discourses that are not dependent on Christian, Buddhist or any other models. Beginning with this methodological question this would be a discourse in studying the role of non-empirical within our society to discover what really goes on, primarily focussing on Ishiguro's connection with samurai ethos.

Samurai were a farmer caste in ancient Japan. They represented a tradition of loyalty and devotion in Japanese culture. The samurai caste flourished in Japan as martial ethics that were meant for the overall protection of Japanese society. They were the symbols of loyalty and punctuality that defined Japanese culture. There are indeed many idealized accounts of medieval samurai warriors who are often identified for their bravery, loyalty, and combat. Their principles of life have represented martial ethics in Japan. However, the samurai caste existed and

flourished in the Edo period (1603-1868) in Japan and continued till its abolishment after the Meiji period (1868-1912). After its abolishment the Japanese became increasingly attracted to foreign cultures and ideologies which have later shaped their cultural consciousness. In this context, China and the West played a major role, especially in changing and diverting the minds of the Japanese from their tradition and history by attracting them towards Western modernization. As foreign cultures prevailed in Japan, the Japanese began seeking an alternative to the samurai tradition, a significant aspect of Japan's identity. Bushido emerged as a new sort of ethical tradition in Japanese society when it came under foreign influences; it was considered an extended form of samurai ethics. Hence, the meaning of bushido became problematic. Japanese scholars, writers, and critics translated it as 'the way of the warrior' or 'the way of samurai'. Oleg Benesch claims that this bushido tradition is a translated form of samurai. In *Inventing the Way of the Samurai*, Benesch calls bushido an 'invented tradition'. He comments,

In its popular interpretation, the tenets ascribed to bushido include courage, benevolence, politeness, selflessness, sincerity, honour, loyalty, self-control, and a strong sense of justice—virtues also found in texts romanticizing the European chivalric ideal. This similarity is not coincidental, as the first significant discussions of modern bushido were directly inspired by English discourse on the roots of the gentleman in medieval knighthood. (1)

Benesch argues that all ideologies are not invented traditions and all invented traditions are not ideologies. In this context, bushido is the best-invented tradition mixed with foreign influences, especially influences of the Christian religion. While Benesch calls bushido an invented tradition, Basil Hall Chamberlain, in his book *The Invention of a New Religion*, critically argues that bushido was a modern invention having no background in traditional and historical Japan. It was accepted as an alternative to "settled religions", aiming to make every person a national character. But some other scholars such as Hagiwara Sakutarō and Okakura Kakuzō dismiss the notion of modern tradition built on bushido theories and interpret it in connection with the old Japanese tradition. However, it is important to note that bushido principles were spread all over Japan to turn it into a national subject. But immediately after the Meiji period was over, the practice of bushido principles lost its appeal among the people. As an attempt to retain its legitimacy and influence in Japanese society, a religious dimension was attached to the concept of the bushido tradition. In Benesch's analysis, bushido, instead of being evidence of the longstanding Japanese tradition, was also understood as a subject of spiritual education in the early decades of the twentieth century. It was practically applied in the military and education and was taught in the form of texts such as *Principles of the National Polity* (200). Somehow, the bushido tradition lost its roots as well as the impression of being traditional, and also the impression of being the extended form

of samurai. It may be noted that the spiritual dimension of bushido in military affairs probably led Japanese soldiers to surrender in the Great War. This surrender was a disaster for the dignity and traditional values of Japan. As a consequence of it, mostly after 1945, people showed their extreme disapproval and negativity for bushido ethics as a post-war reaction. Instead, they were looking for the revival of samurai ideologies. In this respect, the religious connotation attached to the ideologies of this bushido tradition appeared to be the major influence on the extension of the degeneration of Japanese values and ethics in modern Japan.

Even though bushido tradition flourished in Japan with the spirit of nationalism, it turned out to display anti-traditional and anti-samurai aspects in the country. Moreover, it was viewed as a moral discipline controlling the people. As a moral discipline bushido came under the influence of different religions such as Shintoism, Zen Confucianism, and Buddhism (Anesaki 264). There was no other choice but to call bushido a man-made thing that worked under religious guidance. But it is pertinent to note that the Christian religion was the major influence over bushido that caused certain changes in Japanese society. It was started by some Christian-Japanese such as Uchimura Kanzo, Uemura Masahisa, and Inazo Nitobe who had a significant role in the development of bushido ethics. They ran a magazine called "Bushido" in which a few Christian contributors such as Ebara Soroko, Kataoka Kenkichi, and Oi Kentaro endeavoured to combine Christian religion with the cultural ethos of Japan, although initially the bushido tradition was non-religious in the Meiji period. Under the foreign influences, a new model of bushido was brought to Japan in which a large number of Japanese Christians participated. This model was rooted in the Bible and the Confucian classics. In 1920, a Christian educator Ebina Danjo introduced a bushido model known as New Bushido. This model viewed bushido exclusively from Christian perspectives. It was indeed an attack on the samurai notion of fighting for the sake of nation and family. It was opposite to the idea of the bushido being an invented tradition; it rejected all the samurai ethics which were not compatible with Christian principles. This model also instructed people to worship gods and to become religious (Benesch 141). In a way, Christianity and bushido were together going in a new direction which was understood against the norms of the samurai tradition. For that matter, bushido ethics tended to be a man-made religion for the Japanese. It brought new characteristics to Japan with its interaction with the West, especially with Christianity. In other words, Japan, as it is known today, is the result of the historical interaction between the religions and ideologies of Japan and Western countries. In this respect, bushido and Christian principles seem to share some common features in both cultures. This could be another reason why Ishiguro does not see any differences in the lives and cultures of Japan and the West.

Ishiguro, residing in the cultural milieu of Britain, finds himself situated in a complex religious context. He is immersed in Western culture with a predominant

influence on the Christian faith while the backdrop of bushido ethics remains a mark of his country of origin, i.e., Japan. Thereby, his view on religion becomes problematic, particularly his view on Christianity. Ishiguro does not show his approval for Christianity because he believes that religions are man-made things, and Christianity is not an exception. Ishiguro's dilemma can be interrogated in his negotiation with the Christian faith. In an interview held just after the publication of his seventh novel, *The Buried Giant*, Ishiguro in a very confessional mode shared his true feelings and thoughts on Christianity:

Religions are things that we make. It's another question of whether God is made up, but surely religions are man-made things. I wonder if it isn't more than a coincidence that the Christian society is the one that went and pillaged and kidnapped people to become slaves and so on—and went all around the world creating these empires, often in the name of Christianity? I wonder if it would have been as easy for them to do that if it wasn't for this notion that everything is forgiven, that if you made a mistake, you could have a bad conscience about it, pray to God, and it'll be forgiven? (Delistraty)

Ishiguro's contemplative stance, as mentioned above, suggests that he consciously makes distances from Christian influences in his personal life. Taking this aspect into account it can be argued that Ishiguro appears to be negotiating with Christian identity—the identity shared by a large number of people in Britain. Even if we look back to his Japanese background it is evident that the predominance of traditional samurai ideologies in modern Japan has faded away, because Christianity and American popular culture have occupied a remarkable place in the country. Apart from Christian influences, Shintoism in Japan also sets another example of man-made religion that underlines “rites of passage”, and seasonal festivals. Considering these factors, Ishiguro seems to keep a distance from these world religions. Therefore, Ishiguro confronts a conflicting situation out of which the question of compromise arises—compromise between Western cultural influences and bushido's legacy.

However, samurai should not be confused with the world religions which are experienced through prayer, devotion, moral values, and ritual practices or by following only the features of religion—unity, transcendence and transformation. The idea is that when Ishiguro looks back to the old samurai tradition for interrogating what makes religious identity, he feels the root of his identity there, although the decline of samurai ethics in modern Japan is the worst thing Japan has ever come across. As an individual Ishiguro has choice for accepting samurai practices of loyalty, devotion, punctuality, and honesty as compensation for the religious sense of rituals, love, humanity, and god-worship. In doing so, Ishiguro seems to be making an effort to establish the samurai ethos as a significant part of his identity, separate from direct influences of religious discourse. Yukio Mishima, a famous twentieth-

century Japanese author well-known for his love for traditional samurai ethics, committed 'seppuku' or *hara-kiri*, i.e., the honourable method of taking one's own life practised by men of the Samurai class, in 1970 in a public manner, as a protest against the decline of Japanese traditional militarism and samurai warrior. Mishima was very shocked at the loss and decline of traditional samurai values. Ishiguro is often compared with Mishima for his interest in Japanese stereotypes such as loyalty, courage, honour, and respect. However, Ishiguro's approach seems to differ. His embrace of samurai ethics is indeed a compromise between modern Japan and Western influences. Notably, the samurai tradition, which lacks religious dimensions, serves as a foundation for Ishiguro's exploration of identity as a writer. Through experiencing and incorporating the traditional ways of the samurai, Ishiguro shapes his literary identity in a unique manner, negotiating the intersections of Japanese tradition and contemporary influences. It may be noted that during the post-war time, specifically after 1945, samurai ethics had already ceased to exist in both Japan and Britain. Henceforth, samurai principles cannot be specified as guiding values for the Japanese as well as the British within their national territories; rather it has become more and more a universal, suggesting the general agreement of people to instil samurai principles across the world.

In the context of Ishiguro's exploration of Japanese cultural landscape in his search of samurai values, Chu-Chueh Cheng, in *The Margin without Centre*, comments that "the novelist is intentionally portrayed as one whose biological clock permanently stays in the time zone of Japan and whose samurai ancestry remains essential to his lifestyle and authorship" (24). The samurai principles can be experienced in his novels, specifically in *A Pale View of Hills*, *An Artist of the Floating World*, and *The Remains of the Day*. These novels are written in the mould of samurai ethics which is a compromise between Christianity and bushido. The major characters in these novels represent the samurai tradition comprising loyalty, devotion, honesty, and love. Etsuko in *A Pale View of Hills* is a loyal wife; Masuji Ono in *An Artist of the Floating World* a devoted painter; Stevens in *The Remains of the Day* a loyal servant. Ishiguro has portrayed these characters as guided by the samurai principles. These characters attempt to find salvation by doing their respective duties, rather than performing religious duties. His two short stories "Summer After the War" and "A Family Supper" also concern the Samurai aspects because these stories show the bitterness and anxiety of older generations about the lost samurai values in post-war Japanese society of younger generations. Despite his English background, Ishiguro looks back to Japan and tries to delve into the cultural ethos of samurai Japan. For him, the samurai way of Japan is the necessity of his atheism which does not include any sort of religious influences. Yet, as a person, he accommodates a place in the world where religious discourses have never been influenced by world religions. His religion is not dependent on either the Christian or bushido models. This distinctive perspective can be seen as an alternative way for an

artist, granting him the freedom to explore his artistic identity without being constrained by the structures of world religions.

To conclude, this essay has crossed boundaries in its attempt to convey the richness and complexity of finding an alternative religious identity of Kazuo Ishiguro. Starting with the question of religious identity I have argued that religious identities cannot always be located within generative and totemic systems. Religious identities do exist beyond the principles and boundaries of world religions. This essay began with meanings and definitions of religion to challenge a prevalent view that religious identities are only experienced through ritual performances, gods-worship or beliefs in supernatural power. Rather than taking religion as an embedded, performative, and politicised discourse, the essay has attempted to understand the role of the non-empirical within our society. Ishiguro exemplifies an individual who consciously observes his religion in connection with the samurai ethos. Therefore, his identity in terms of religion is personal or an individual subject; it is a matter of choice and compromise.

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